

The Natural Lawn Program –A New Approach to Outdoor Water Conservation

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Background

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) provides water to about 1,144,000 people in the Seattle-King County area. Approximately half of the residents receive their water directly from SPU (the former Seattle Water Department), while twenty-eight wholesale customers consisting of suburban cities and water districts provide water to the other half.

During typical summers, consumption increases dramatically and on some days is almost double that of the average daily winter consumption. Winter water consumption is about 140 million gallons per day. Summer levels go up to over 250 million gallons, on some days. Most of the summer peak is due to lawn watering and other outdoor use. On an average, single family residential consumption accounts for 65% of total consumption.

Public information and education programs emphasizing conservation have been an important focus of SPU. Through the years, targeted media and advertising campaigns, numerous brochures, bill inserts, school presentations and informational displays have raised customer consciousness about the need for and value of water conservation. Prior to 1997, the message focussed primarily on water conservation with an emphasis to change outdoor watering behavior. In early 1997 SPU, in collaboration with other regional utilities and agencies, embarked on a more comprehensive resource conservation approach, focussing on lawns and lawn care behaviors rather than merely water and watering behaviors.

Why Lawns?

Most conservation specialists in the western U.S. specializing in residential outdoor programs will support the statement that lawns, or to be more accurate what people do to their lawns, creates a big part of the problem. Not only do people water their lawns extensively and, in many cases, excessively, they also use that water when it is needed the most. This is certainly true of the Seattle area – water use increases by 25 to 50% during the summer months when supplies are stretched and precipitation is at its lowest. Lawns also pose other resource challenges. Grass clippings are the single largest component of yard waste in this region. Pesticides and fertilizers used on lawns pollute lakes, streams and groundwater, can be harmful to fish and can even pose hazards to public health. Plus, and perhaps most importantly, time and again research

showed that customers care passionately about their lawns. Surveys indicated that for 61% of the population it is very or somewhat important to have a green lawn as part of their landscape and further studies showed that when taking care of their lawns, people are thinking about their lawns and not water or chemicals or waste. Given the multiple impacts of lawn care practices on resources and the environment and the need to get at the root cause of the problem – the lawn ethic, Seattle Public Utilities launched the Natural Lawn Program in 1997 – a comprehensive multi agency approach to conserve water, reduce yard waste and reduce chemical and pesticide use.

A Regional Effort – The Partners

The campaign is a multi-agency, regional program. The main partners are SPU, Resource Conservation (including water and solid waste), SPU Water Purveyors including 28 suburban cities and water districts and, King County, Department of Natural Resources, and the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County. Secondary partners include Thurston County, the Water Conservation Coalition of Puget Sound, City of Everett, and the City of Redmond. Together this group of utilities and cooperatives provide water service to 64% of Washington state's population of 5.2 million.

Program Goals

The long term campaign goal is to change the northwest lawn ethic and move lawn care practices toward environmentally best practices for lawn care (and eventually sustainable landscapes). Specifically, the objectives focus on three primary areas of resource conservation with the premise that the use of natural lawn care practices should result in:

- less water use (a healthy lawn needs less water to stay green)
- fewer grass clippings collected at the curb (due to grasscycling)
- less water pollution (because of reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides)
- less hazardous waste (from leftover pesticides)

The Target Audience

Primary Audience

- Residential: males age 35-64 who own homes, make >\$40,000 per year, and live in suburbs or other areas with large lawns. The focus on men is based on market research which shows that more men are responsible for lawn care than women.

Secondary Audiences

- Higher income single family resident home-owners (male and female) with large lots and lawn areas
- Professional: lawn and landscape maintenance professionals (commercial and institutional)

Campaign Theme and Messages

The campaign theme is ---

"When it comes to your lawn, act naturally"

Specific messages focussing on the three primary resource areas are:

Use Water Wisely:

- water deeply and let lawns dry out between watering

Reduce the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides:

- use organic or slow-release fertilizers instead of soluble fertilizers
- spot-treat or pull weeds instead of using weed and feed products

Grasscycle – leave the clippings on your lawn:

- mow higher and leave grass clippings on the lawn; use mulching mowers

The Strategy - A Creative Marketing Approach to Change Ethic

How does one influence the ethic of a large and widespread population, get them to change the way they think and make specific behavior changes, all within a limited time and very limited resources? The Natural Lawn Team decided to follow the path of leading marketing experts and paid attention to the principles of the four step behavior change model *Attention, Interest, Desire, Action*. This process which is often used to create product purchasing behavior states the following:

- First, get the *Attention* of the target audience
- Then convince them that there is a need and get their *Interest*
- After that motivate them and create a *Desire* for change
- Finally, provide them with information and ways to take *Action*

For the Natural Lawn Campaign this approach was used and in coordination with an aggressive and targeted marketing plan a highly effective conservation campaign was implemented.

Following this model for the Natural Lawns Program, a unified campaign was created to communicate the three message areas as a package of behaviors

and a comprehensive marketing strategy was selected that utilized highly creative ads and the media tools of paid radio and TV advertising, direct marketing and public relations. In addition the campaign includes various other strategies such as bill inserts, newsletters, workshops/seminars, trade shows, training outreach volunteers (e.g. SPU Master Composters), demonstration gardens, educational materials and provides an overall comprehensive educational package.

Campaign Marketing Research and Evaluation Strategy

The research and evaluation goals for the campaign were established at the outset, as the strategies were being designed. As a result it was possible to monitor the success and effectiveness of the program on a regular basis and establish tracking data. Several methods of campaign evaluation were followed. Listed below are the different techniques that have been implemented and a brief summary of the overall campaign evaluation to date is given later in this paper.

- ***SoundStats:***

A pre and post survey implemented before and after the campaign promotion each year. With this survey it is possible to study the effectiveness of the promotion strategy (pre-and post recall and impact of communication message), awareness and attitudes, key behaviors and behavior changes as they relate to outdoor lawn watering, grasscycling and the use of weed and feed and lawn chemicals.

- ***Focus Groups:***

Focus groups consisting of all male participants, the primary target audience have been used to get qualitative feedback on various campaign elements and to help with future program and concept design.

- ***Ongoing research:***

Surveys of high water users, water use data, pesticide users, other residents, water quality monitoring data. Sales data for purchases of pesticides, fertilizers, mulching mowers, weed pullers, etc.

- ***Advertising Data:***

Data on reach and frequency, gross impressions of ads.

- ***Other***

Numbers of people attending workshops, calling phone line, etc. Numbers of brochures distributed.

1997 Natural Lawn Campaign

Radio

A major emphasis of the 1997 campaign was radio advertising. Three radio ads – “Giant bug”, “Flood”, and “Newsreel” were created each emphasizing a specific message area. These ads were highly creative and extremely humorous and sent the message “don’t overdo it”. A total of 1806 radio spots were rotated over nine weeks from April through August, coinciding with the growing season. The ads focussing on grasscycling and chemical use were predominant in April – June while the ad emphasizing water conservation was given higher frequency from mid June – August, coinciding with the irrigation season. The top nine radio stations of the region aired the spots and the message had a reach of over 76% at a frequency of over 12.

TV

In addition to radio and as a means to start changing the lawn ethic, “Grass Party” a TV ad was created which cleverly questioned the value of “green” in a lawn. Due to limited resources, this ad aired primarily on cable TV stations with a predominantly male audience.

Public Relations and Press

In addition to the paid advertising for the campaign the campaign included various public relations and publicity tactics. These included pro-bono public service announcements on various stations, promotional give-aways and media interviews during key programs, and two significant events. – The Natural Lawn Care ‘Block Party’ and The Pesticides in Our Streams Press coverage”

• *The Natural Lawn Care Block Party:*

As part of the media strategy, a “Natural Lawn Block Party” was hosted at a suburban home in the suburb of Clyde Hill, a high income neighborhood with large homes where the residents pride in their green lawns. The purpose was to gather the community, create a neighborhood awareness and acceptance of Natural Lawn Care and to use the event to get the media to promote the natural lawn care message throughout the region. Attendance to the event was very high and media coverage was excellent, especially given the fact that we had to contend with an earthquake and heavy rains on that day!

- ***Media Coverage on the Pesticide issue***

A study by USGS found 23 pesticides used by local homeowners in urban streams. This information was issued as a press release and people were asked to change their ways and practice Natural Lawn Care. This story got extensive press coverage and in particular brought to light the potential health and environmental effects of common pesticide use. These news reports also got the landscape industry professionals and a group called the Washington Friends of Farmers to challenge our approach.

Print

Print marketing was part of the campaign mix as a means to reach the secondary target audiences and to provide more comprehensive information for change than was possible through the other media. These included a door-hanger brochure distribution, three bill inserts and lawn care mailing in response to a phone line.

- ***Door-hanger distribution:***

A brochure created as a door-hanger and containing information on the Six Steps to Natural Lawn Care was developed. These were distributed door to door in select neighborhoods throughout the region. The neighborhoods were selected based on lot sizes and those with homes in the top 15 % in residential lot sizes were targeted. A total of 40,000 brochures were placed on the doors of 28 neighborhoods in the Seattle/King County region.

- ***Bill Inserts:***

A series of three bill inserts, one each in Spring, Summer and Fall were mailed to 300,000 home-owners along with their utility bills. Each focussed on the specific message – grasscycling in Spring, water conservation in Summer, and reducing the use of weed and feed in Fall. The common campaign theme and the six steps tied the various materials together and demonstrated the inter-connection of the various messages.

- ***Phone -Line and Customer Mailings:***

A toll free phone line was created for the campaign to enable customers to call in for additional information. All customers who request information through this phone line receive a detailed fact sheet, Six Steps To Natural Lawn Care, the Natural Lawn Care Resource Guide and additional brochures on water conservation, grasscycling and yard waste reduction and household hazardous waste management/pesticide reduction. In 1997 alone, the phone line received over one thousand calls.

1998 Natural Lawn Campaign

There was some fairly important shifts in approach and strategies with the 1998 Natural Lawn Campaign. Instead of merely asking residents not to “overdo it” and providing tips on how to practice Natural Lawn Care, the 1998 campaign emphasized the reasons why it is important for people to think about their lawn care behaviors and make a change. The campaign emphasized the importance of individual actions on the environment. In particular, a connection was made between individual lawn care habits and the health of the northwest salmon. In 1998, a much more ambitious outreach strategy was embarked upon to promote this message. The message was promoted through broadcast TV during the Seattle Mariners’ games. It was believed that this would get a significant *reach* by getting the message out to a very large number of people in the target audience. Also, the timing of the baseball season coincided with the lawn season.

This strategic emphasis, particularly with regard to the message was driven by two major factors.

- Evaluation of the 1997 campaign indicated that while around 35% of the audience were able to recall the Natural Lawn Care messages, when probed further they demanded more content particularly education on the impacts of their actions and the problems that natural lawn care can solve.
- The Endangered Species Act and the potential listing of the Puget Sound Chinook Salmon added urgency to the issue and it was important to make the connection between lawn care practices and protecting the salmon.

Media Strategy

TV

The primary communication tool for 1998 was the TV ad “grass fish” which aired during the Mariners’ games during prime time on KIRO, the Mariners station. “Grass Fish”, featuring Bert the salmon, is a humorous computer animated ad which shows a fish jumping out of lawn, makes a direct connection of lawn care practices to the fish issues and relates the importance of resource conservation.

This advertising package provided six months of exposure (April-Sept.) to an audience that very closely matched the target demographic. In addition to the paid advertising the package offered various discounts, PSA options and other value added elements. The package was also negotiated at a substantial price discount. The Seattle Mariners were the most watched program on TV in 1997. It was estimated that the ad would reach over 15,000,000 households in 1998 and over 235,000 households per game.

Radio

In addition to the TV ad, three radio ads – “Follow the Pesticides”, “Swimming around”, and “Bert and the Lawnmower” were created each emphasizing a specific message area. All three ads featured “Bert the salmon” and once again aired on major radio stations from April through August, coinciding with the growing season. The ads focusing on grasscycling and chemical use were predominant in April – June while the ad emphasizing water conservation was given higher frequency from mid June – August, coinciding with the irrigation season. The top eight radio stations of the region aired the spots and the message had a reach of over 74.6% at a frequency of over 12.

Public Relations and Press

In 1998, the public relations (PR) strategy and publicity tactics were greatly expanded. This was one way of communicating a more comprehensive message and emphasizing the need, the impact and the inter-relationships between residential lawn care, the environment and the salmon. It was also a means to start looking at “lawn ethic” and identifying opportunities for change. Two significant media/community events were organized as part of the strategy. In addition, the campaign was able to benefit from the publicity generated by a third region-wide program and grasscycling promotional event that offered mulch mower rebates. As in 1997, the PR strategy also included additional pro-bono public service announcements on various stations, promotional give-aways and media interviews during key programs.

- ***Saving our Salmon one Neighbor at a Time: The Natural Lawn Care Community Forum:***

Seattle Mayor Paul Schell was invited to conduct this event at the home of Blake Yaffee an eighth grade student from Washington Middle School who had recently had a letter published in several local newspapers voicing his concern about common lawn care practices and how they adversely affect the region. Mayor Schell decided to bring the community together to honor Blake’s efforts and to use the forum to shed light on several important issues and to:

- Enhance the environmental ethic by educating residents to change their lawn care practices for the benefit of the region’s salmon and avoid an adverse impact on the environment.
- Give residents the necessary knowledge and tools to make easy changes that are actually good for their lawns as well as the environment.

- Energize and support residents in developing similar forums in their own neighborhoods to discuss these issues.

This event was one of the most successful public relations efforts in recent years. Every local TV station covered the event, some in several news segments. The two leading Seattle newspapers carried front page feature stories of the event; several community papers had extensive coverage and news radio stations conducted several interviews.

- ***Media Coverage on the Pesticide issue***

A press release was issued regarding the concerns about increased diazinon use on lawns during August and September. The press release mentioned the potential harm to birds and the long term effects of diazinon on fish including the Chinook salmon. The press release also alerted to consumers to the fact that adult crane flies cannot be controlled in late summer and fall by applying pesticides and asked consumers to consider natural lawn care options. Once again, this issue got extensive media coverage.

Print

- ***Bill Inserts:***

For the 1998 campaign, one bill insert/newsletter which focused primarily on water conservation and the impact of excessive water use on lakes and streams and the salmon was distributed to 300,000 customers.

- ***Natural Lawn Care Booklet:***

Based on the Six Steps for Natural Lawn Care created in 1998, a more comprehensive brochure "Natural Lawn Care for Western Washington" was developed. Various professional and turf representatives were involved in the development of this piece. This information was distributed at various seminars and events, through participating utilities and through the phone line.

- ***Phone -Line and Customer Mailings:***

The toll free phone line was continued in 1998 and used to distribute the Natural Lawn Care for Western Washington brochure, the Natural Lawn Care Resource Guide and additional brochures on water conservation, grasscycling and yard waste reduction and household hazardous waste management/pesticide reduction.

Evaluation

The Soundstats survey conducted twice a year, just prior to campaign implementation and after the end of the promotion has provided a consistent evaluation mechanism for the two years of the campaign. There is a definite

change in attitudes and lawn care behaviors that is reflecting a movement towards natural lawn care. Some of the highlights are:

- **Lawn Watering:** For the question - “During a typical summer, how often do you water your lawn?” respondents who said they never water their lawn went up five percentage points after the 1997 campaign and has stayed at that level through 1998 (18.4% in April 1997 and 23.9% in August 1998).
- **Weeds in the Lawn:** Since April 1997 there has been a steady and significant increase in the percentage of people who don’t care about weeds (7.5% in April 1997 compared to 13.6% in August 1998).
- **Grasscycling:** Since April 1997 there has been a steady increase in the percentage of people who leave their clippings on the lawn “most of the time” or “sometimes” (44.6% in April 1997 and 56.1% in August 1998).

Water use has consistently remained at about 10% below average especially during the summer months. Additional research and a more detailed evaluation is planned for the campaign at the end of 1998.

Landscape/Professional Industry Concerns

One of the unexpected results of the campaign in 1997 was concern raised by the landscape Industry professional and other organizations, in particular the Washington Friends of Farmers. Two main issues were brought forth by these groups. One, industry professionals were concerned about potential water supply issues particularly given the fact that 1998 was predicted to be an El Nino year with the possibility of an unusually dry summer. The second issue, which also elevated the conflict level, was concern about the pesticide message and whether or not it was appropriate for government agencies to convey the message on the potential health hazards of pesticide use. In response to these concerns, staff from SPU worked diligently with industry representatives to resolve issues, communicate better and find ways to collaborate. One of the positive outcomes of this process is that SPU has been successful in establishing a professional landscape certification program in collaboration with the Washington Association of Landscape Professionals.

Conclusion

The Natural Lawn Program has been very successful and is a classic example of a public information effort that has brought measurable results. In addition to clearly meeting water conservation and other resource conservation goals, the campaign has been successful in creating awareness and achieving behavior change. It has also adapted to meet the changing needs of the northwest and is

now a significant part of the overall strategy to help save and protect the salmon.

Since 1997, the number of sponsoring agencies has expanded significantly. In addition, other regional efforts focusing on landscape education have carried the Natural Lawn theme – “When It Comes To Your lawn, Act Naturally” to build upon the success of this program. It has attracted attention from utilities and public agencies throughout the Pacific Northwest and from other parts of the nation for its innovation and creative utility partnering.

The program’s success lies in its commitment to the long term. Values and ethics change slowly and over time and for “natural lawns” to be a symbol of the northwest, a continued effort is needed. Currently, efforts are underway to complete the 1998 evaluation and start the planning process for 1999.

APPENDIX 1 BUDGET

1997 Budget

Funding sources:

Seattle Public Utilities Water and Solid Waste, Water Purveyors	\$160,000
King County, Water Quality and Hazardous Waste	\$130,000
Other partners,	\$ 35,000
TOTAL	\$325,000

Campaign Expenditures:

Strategic Planning, Creative and Production	\$ 44,500
Paid Media (Radio & TV)	\$215,000
Media Relations/Publicity	\$ 15,000
Print	\$ 38,000
Evaluation	\$12,500
TOTAL	\$325,000

1998 Budget

Some additional partners slightly expanded our budget in 1998.

Funding sources:

Seattle Public Utilities Water and Solid Waste, Water Purveyors	\$165,000
King County, Water Quality and Hazardous Waste	\$150,000
Other partners,	\$ 42,500
TOTAL	\$357,500

Campaign Expenditures:

Strategic Planning, Creative and Production	\$ 47,000
Paid Media TV	\$175,000
Paid Media Radio	\$ 90,000
Media Relations/Publicity	\$ 30,000
Evaluation	\$15,500
TOTAL	\$357,500

APPENDIX 2
1998 Radio and TV Ad Scripts

NATURAL LAWNS

>GRASSFISH RADIO

>:60

>"Follow the Pesticides"

>

>

>

>SFX: BIRDS, NEIGHBORHOOD SOUNDS

>

>FISH: Hi, I'm Bert. I'm a fish. Salmon, to be specific. I decided to get some air and hang out >here on this nice green lawn for a while. And boy, I tell you (COUGH >COUGH) it ain't as healthy as it looks around here.

>

>Man, this guy just inundated his lawn with weed and feed just to get rid of >a few dandelions. Now weed and feed is pesticide mixed with fertilizer and >guess where this pesticide can end up. Here follow me and I'll show you. >

>VOICE MUFFLES: First some of it goes down into the ground here. Hello, worm >

>WORM: (VERY HIGH PITCHED) Howdy.

>

>FISH: While some of it runs off into the street and down storm drains. >Then it can end up (VOICE UNMUFFLES AND SPLASH) in the stream here. >Recently, scientists like Roy here...

>

>ROY: (VERY AUTHORITATIVE) Howdy

>

>FISH: ...found 23 different types of pesticides used by homeowners in >local streams. I gotta tell you us salmon ain't too happy about it. >

>SFX--FISH GETTING OUT OF THE WATER

>

>FISH: Let me towel off here for a minute. Remember what you put on your >lawn can end up in my stream. So please, pull the weeds by hand and think >twice before using weed and feed or other pesticides. When it comes to >your lawn, act naturally. For more information, call 888-860-LAWN. A >message from local cities, counties and water utilities promoting a healthy >environment.

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>
 >NATURAL LAWNS
 >GRASSFISH RADIO
 >:60
 >"Swimming around"
 >
 >
 >
 >SFX--NEIGHBORHOOD
 >
 >BERT: Hey this is Bert. And I'm a fish. Salmon, actually. And I've got my whole fish family >here on this guys front lawn. Since so many people overwater their lawns I >figured we could at least come over here and run through the sprinklers. >
 >BERT: (YELLS OFF MIC) Uhh kids, kids, stay away from the deep water OK.
 >
 >MARGE: Uh honey, they're fish, remember.
 >
 >BERT: Never mind. See, this guy's wasting a lot of water that would >otherwise be going in our lakes and streams, I mean we fish need it. >
 >(YELLS) Johnny, don't splash those whirligigs.
 >
 >And in the summertime when water is scarce, people tend to use it the most, >and waste it the most. And that leaves less for us. Besides, it's not the >greatest thing for your lawn to begin with. C'mon let's take a look. >
 >WATER VOICE
 >
 >Watering too much and too often results in shallow roots that make for an >unhealthy lawn. Plus it can cause lawn disease.
 >
 >(REGULAR VOICE)
 >
 >So folks, water enough to moisten the rootzone but don't overdo it, lawns >only need an inch a week to stay healthy. And remember when it comes to >your lawn, act naturally. For more information, call 888-860-LAWN. A >message from local cities, counties and water utilities promoting a healthy >environment.

> NATURAL LAWNS
 >>GRASSFISH RADIO
 >>:60
 >>"Bert and the Lawnmower"
 >>
 >>
 >>
 >>SFX--NEIGHBORHOOD, LAWN MOWER, MAN HUMMING
 >>
 >>FISH: Hey buddy
 >>
 >>MAN: What are you doing on my lawn?
 >>
 >>FISH: Mowing it.
 >>
 >>MAN: But you're a fish.
 >>
 >>FISH: Yeah, the name's Bert. Bert the salmon. and I gotta tell you, you've
 >>been mowing your lawn all wrong.
 >>
 >>MAN: What?
 >>
 >>FISH: Yeah, grasscycling is the way to go. Leave the clippings on the
 >>lawn. It saves time cause you don t have to bag and drag clippings to >>the
 curb. And it saves money cause you don't use as much fertilizer. >>And that
 helps keep my stream clean.
 >>
 >>MAN: Gimme that mower back. (SOUNDS OF SCUFFLE) You're gonna
 >>cause thatch...
 >>
 >>FISH: Hey, studies have shown that grasscycling doesn't build up >>thatch...
 >>
 >>MAN (breathing hard): But what happens to it?
 >>
 >>FISH: ... as mulch it returns naturally to the soil.
 >>
 >>SFX: STRUGGLE SOUNDS
 >>
 >>FISH: Hey, watch the gills.
 >>
 >>MAN: Sorry.
 >>

>>FISH: OK, so mow when the grass is dry. Then cut your grass high and let
>>it lie. About 2 inches high. Don't hack it down to the nub. If you want >>the
lawn to look extra good, think about buying a mulching mower. >>
>>MAN: That's great, but can I ask you something?
>>
>>FISH: Sure.
>>
>>MAN: Why is a fish telling me all this?
>>
>>FISH: Because I care about the environment. It's home for me. Remember
>>when it comes to your lawn, act naturally. For more information, call
>>888-860-LAWN. A message from local cities, counties and water utilities
>>promoting a healthy environment.
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>
>LAWNS CAMPAIGN
>:30 TV
>"Grass Fish"

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>
>
>VIDEO AUDIO
>
>
>OPEN ON LAWN
>
>FISH JUMPS INTO FRAME AND SWIMS UP TOWARD THE CAMERA
>
>FISH IN FULL FRAME FISH: Hi, I'm a fish. Normally I'd be out doing
>important things like swimming and spawning. But today, I gotta tell you
>somethin' about your lawn here. When you use weed and bug killers it can
>get into my water supply. Gets my kids all sick. And make sure you use
>water wisely--leave some for us. Finally when you mow, leave the clippings
>on the lawn so you'll need less fertilizer. OK, you got all that, now I >
>have to go migrate.
>
>FISH SWIMS OFF PAGE AND JUMPS BACK INTO WATER
>
>TITLE CARD: When it comes to your lawn, act naturally.
>
>888-860-LAWN

>

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